

## 168hh- The Contradiction in the Unwholesome

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

(A Summarised Transcription Of A Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

Nm: Unwholesome things are unwholesome because in themselves they contain a contradiction or a discrepancy.

### Killing

Q: You can see the same thread of contradiction running through every unwholesome action. Take killing, for example, one takes away the life of another which does not belong to you.

Nm: It's a contradiction. You're destroying something that's not yours as if it were yours. Also, life is implicitly valuable for everyone, even for people who don't necessarily have a view that life is worth living. Still, they can only do that based on being alive. That means that life in itself is taken at its face value, and it has value. So, you as the one who implicitly values life, destroying the life of another, that's another discrepancy of the values i.e while you value life you are now acting towards destroying life intentionally.

Q: You are trying to conceal that fundamental value.

Nm: Not explicitly. No, that's implied in it. You might not even completely think about it at all. You're not intentionally trying to conceal it.

Q: We are then born into that kind of concealment, we are born not knowing wholesome and unwholesome.

Nm: You're not born with fully developed concealments. But as the Buddha said, all the underlying tendencies for those concealments are present in a newborn. So they will grow and develop.

Q: The ignorance that we start with, it's not something that we decided to do.

Nm: Basically ignorance is part of the way you attend to things. It's implicit in it. You know, when you attend to something, you automatically have to ignore something else, you cannot attend to everything. That's the principle of avijja, in other words, by looking this way, you will not be able to look at the other way simultaneously. So which is the most common way that people choose to look? Well, it's the way of least resistance. It's the way of sensuality. It's the way of ill will, it's the way of passion, desire, satisfaction. So it's the way of "with the grain", "with the flow". Simply attending to that "way" means you're not attending the other way. You cannot attend both at the same time. You have to find a good reason to start looking "upstream" and then start swimming upstream, while everything is trying to pull you downstream.

Q: Can you say that, that which is unwholesome is that which goes against the way things are?

Nm: Yes, but I don't like using the term "the way things are" because that has been overused and is quite mystified already. It would be better to say that "it goes against the universal principles" i.e the Dhamma. And you need to understand the Dhamma to know what those universal principles are. You can have an idea of what nature's law is and then infer from there what is wholesome, but that's on the level of an abstract view, which can correspond to the practical application to some extent. Some people can have an accurate abstract view but haven't truly understood the nature of wholesome as wholesome.

### **Stealing**

Q: If we can just go to the next precept, which is to refrain from "taking that which is not given". How is stealing unwholesome?

Nm: First of all, you can see that you cannot accidentally break the precepts. The perception is the fundamental factor. If you perceive that something is truly yours, and you take it because you perceive it as yours but it happens not to belong to you, it's just a mistake, there's no stealing involved. Stealing requires your intentional effort to override the truth, which is what the discrepancy is. So intentional effort to override the value of life, which is implicit, even if you don't think about it, or intentional effort to override the value of ownership, which is implicit, but you choose to ignore it. That's why these things are unwholesome. If you choose to act with intention of ill will, desire, carelessness, means you're accepting that contradicting value.

### **Sexual Misconduct**

Q: The next precept of refraining from sexual misconduct or having sexual relations with people you shouldn't e.g another's wife or underage persons etc, is again misappropriating things that do not belong to you.

Nm: You perceive it as not yours, as something that shouldn't be engaged with, and then you choose to give priority to your desire and ignore the factual basis of your perception. And why is passion or desire a contradiction? Why is that desire, a contradiction on the existential level? What is the discrepancy there? Desire is always towards sense objects. Whatever you desire, it's going to be one of these six sense objects. Can you have any of those six sense objects without the senses being there, without the mind being there, can you have sights without the eye? So what is the nature of the senses?

Q: They're not mine.

Nm: How can you then cultivate the desire for that which you can only get on account of things that are not yours. The only way you can cultivate desire towards those sense objects is to take these senses to be yours, to begin with. So you can't have a desire towards sense objects without implicitly taking up the ownership of the senses. Taking up what's not yours, starts on the level of welcoming desire. Desire arises and by welcoming it, you take up desire and every value that that desire implies. The value is that senses belong to you, that they are in your control, enjoyable, and not dangerous.

Q: You're acting from a premise that these senses are mine, safe, secure, and delightful.

Nm: That's all implicit. You can't ask for the desire to not manifest itself. You have no say in that. But you have a say in your ATTITUDE towards the manifestation of desire or ill will. Are you welcoming it, delighting in it? Are you rejoicing in the prospect of fulfilling that desire? Even if you practice sense restraint, are you still entertaining the phenomenon of desire in your experience when desire manifests? And if you do, that's why you're still contradicting yourself on the existential basis because you cannot possibly entertain the value of desire without implicitly taking up the ownership of the sense bases. If you stop valuing the sense objects, stop entertaining desire towards them, you get to uproot the taking up (assumption) the sense organs as yours.

Q: Basically, you have a desire towards sense objects because you've misappropriated the senses.

Nm: Yes, it's like a vicious circle. Because you appropriate the senses, as in you don't question your ownership of them, that's how you cultivate desire towards the sense objects. Because you cultivate desire towards sense objects, that's how you appropriate the sense organs. So one feeds the other. Therefore, first, you need to start restraining your behavior on account of the desire towards sense objects, as in you need to start keeping the precepts. And then once that becomes your norm of behavior, then you can get to see that on the mental level, you should now stop delighting in it, welcoming it, flirting with it, even if you know you're not going to act physically. And then eventually, you will dry out from that wetness of desire, and then you get to see the true nature of those senses which is perilous.

However, you can't just say okay, I'm not regarding my senses as mine anymore. Because that thought of your senses is a sense object. You cannot directly experience your sense organs, which is why they always have implicit ownership that you need to undo indirectly. You can't just decide to let go of them, because you're not holding it intentionally. So, what is the thing that if you let go of will result in you not having ownership of the sense organs? It's the desire towards sense objects. Letting go of that, you're a step closer to letting go of the sense organs which you cannot perceive, and if you think you can, that is because you are conceiving them, which is not what they are.

You get trapped by sense organs because you pick up the bait of the sense objects. Your desire is you picking up the bait and thus getting trapped. Therefore, to no longer be trapped, you must simply no longer pick up the bait, and then INDIRECTLY you will no longer be appropriating the sense organs as yours. (You cannot directly let go of sense organs.)

## **Lying**

Q: The next precept is refraining from misrepresenting the truth.

Nm: The fundamental lie is avijja. Would you be able to be complacent, lazy, dull and careless, if you were placed in a dangerous situation that you perceive as dangerous? It would be inconceivable for you to relax on that level, to completely just let your mind melt away and forget about itself. And yet here you are in the most perilous situation you can be in, being subject to death, sickness, aging. And yet you are completely complacent. It's the fundamental contradiction, the hardest one to undo. Because it's not as obvious as desire or ill will.

For example, if you want to do a little experiment, if you're not sure if your existence in itself is dangerous, just lock yourself in a room, a comfortable room. But don't engage with any distraction for a day, switch your phone off, switch everything off, don't talk, and don't step outside. Just sit alone on a chair or a bed and stare at the wall. And let's see how long you can do that before you start freaking out on account of that boredom. So if boredom is not truly dangerous. Why are you afraid of it? Why do you constantly need something to keep yourself engaged, to swim so that you don't sink? Why are you terrified of solitude and loneliness? Just think, if you get sick and can't move, can't distract yourself with all these things and projects. How will your mind remain? Will it be unaffected by that or will you start completely losing it? So let the boredom endure. And it's going to turn into full-blown anxiety and dread, and why is that if existence is not dangerous and perilous, where does this anxiety come from? Because you haven't done anything by the way. You're in a perfectly safe environment. Locked, nobody can get in, safe as you can be. And yet here you are freaking out internally. Because that's what your existence is, it's all these efforts and actions you do, to enable yourself to ignore that very nature.

Imagine somebody comes and tells you that you have ten minutes to live. Would you continue laughing carelessly, watching movies, or playing games? It will be impossible for you to do that. Because suddenly the sense of urgency is back, and the only reason a sense of urgency can be restored is because it's always there implicitly. That thread of anxiety that you can never completely cover-up is for everyone what human existence is. Only the *Arabant* is completely free from it.

When you are young, healthy, and have all the senses working, it feels like there's no problem. As I said, just do a little experiment, close yourself in a room for half a day and see what will happen to your mind when there are no distractions available. And if your mind was problem-free beforehand, this will not cause any issues, yet it does. Solitude starts revealing the main motivation for all your various engagements, which is to cover up your underlying anxiety on account of your fundamentally uncertain existence.

## Intoxication

Q: The fifth precept, refraining from intoxicants, is unwholesome because it's the basis for carelessness, it's the covering up of any mental clarity that one has.

Nm: Yes, can you possibly engage with intoxicating substances without implicitly endorsing complacency and dullness of your mind? Inconceivable. I don't necessarily mean getting drunk, I mean that simply by engaging with that substance, to whatever extent, you are increasing dullness of mind, which always results in increased heedlessness. Dullness means loss of context, loss of perspective, even if you're not drunk, it's still the direction of losing context and perspective, even if it's half a step.

Can you engage with the absolute minimum level of intoxication, without valuing it, without delighting in the prospect of the dullness of the mind, preferring the pleasure of numb distraction? Can you be engaging with that direction of intoxication if you see it as dangerous? Can you put one foot inside the lion's den, when there's a chance that the lion is right there by the entrance? You wouldn't flirt with that idea at all. A little bit of poison is still poison. It doesn't affect you like a lot of poison would, but it's still a poison which affects you, which means that it might be enough to kill you.

Remember you're already full of wrong views concerning everything, in regards to desire, in regards to ill will. For all of that to be undone there is a lot of work to do, and yet here you are flirting with the things that directly result in increasing those wrong views. So yes, literally a glass of wine might be enough to fully cement you in the wrong view that sensuality is not bad. And because of that, you will not get the right view and you will remain bound to samsara, for cons to come. Is the glass of wine worth that risk? Do you really know there is no risk?

Q: When you are intoxicated with life, health, and youth, you don't consider the inherent risk.

Nm: Yes, you don't consider the context, which is that you might be healthy, alive, and young now, but can you guarantee that there will be the next breath? No, you have no guarantee of that. When you fall away from recognizing that context, you go into the direction of desire towards sense objects, towards intoxication with the world. You cannot have both, you cannot be absorbed in/ intoxicated with the world while maintaining a clear, dispassionate, mindful perspective. Thinking that you can is the result of your intoxication with the sensual world. Thinking that you are seeing clearly while you are intoxicated is a contradiction.